

PANDOLFO COLLENUCCIO'S *SPECCHIO D'ESOPO* AND THE PORTRAIT OF THE COURTIER

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The ancient fables of Aesop figure prominently in Giovanni Boccaccio's defense of fictional discourse included in his *Genealogie deorum gentilium*: a fourteenth-century mythographic text which generated extensive commentary. In book fourteen, Boccaccio advocates the fables as indispensable pedagogical tools, especially important to the intellectual development and leadership potential of a prince. In order to provide an illustrative example, Boccaccio relates how King Robert of Sicily, as a boy,

was so dull that it took the utmost skill and patience of his master to teach him the mere elements of letters. When all his friends were nearly in despair of his doing anything, his master, by the most subtle skill, as it were, lured his mind with the fables of Aesop into so grand a passion for study and knowledge, that in a brief time he was not only learned in the Liberal Arts familiar to Italy, but also entered with wonderful keenness of mind into the very inner mysteries of sacred philosophy. In short, he made himself a king whose superior learning men have not seen since Solomon.¹

Boccaccio considers Aesop's fables prime examples of incredible fiction (*fabula*), or discourse, "which, under the guise of invention, illustrates or proves an idea; and, as its superficial aspect is removed, the meaning of the author is clear".² His definition relies in part on

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¹ *Boccaccio on Poetry*, trans. C. OSGOOD, Indianapolis-New York, 1956, p. 51. I have made a few minor adjustments to Osgood's translation for clarity.

² *Ibid.*, p. 48. Boccaccio continues: "The first [kind of fiction] superficially lacks all appearance of truth; for example, when brutes or inanimate things converse. Aesop, an ancient Greek, grave and venerable, was past master in this form; and though it is a common

the authority of the classical author Aulus Gellius, whose *Attic Nights* labels Aesop “sapiens” because of his ability to nourish the mind and perpetuate knowledge through delightful fictions: “[...] since he taught what it was salutary to call to mind and to recommend, not in an austere and dictatorial manner, as in the way of philosophers, but by inventing witty and entertaining fables he put into men’s minds and hearts ideas that were wholesome and carefully considered, while at the same time he enticed their attention”.³ Renaissance authors valued the fables of Aesop as supreme literature; they were seen as a window to the wisdom and teachings of the ancient world. Boccaccio’s endorsement of the fables as beneficial to the formation of a prince’s political identity also earned them a central place in Renaissance court culture.

Pandolfo Collenuccio, while a resident at the Este court of Ferrara, developed Boccaccio’s argument by promoting the reading and reciting of Aesop’s fables in all aspects of court life. In particular, his vernacular expository dialogue *Specchio d’Esopo* (*Mirror of Aesop*), composed around 1497 in the guise of a fable, offers a variety of strategies on how to integrate fables into both public and private address. A study of his dialogue will provide insight into the ways in which members of court society experienced Aesop’s fables. Moreover, an examination of the reception of Collenuccio’s *Specchio d’Esopo* will reveal a literary and cultural context in which to decipher a unique iconography found in Italian portraiture of the early sixteenth century.

Collenuccio was born in Pesaro in 1444, and studied law at the University of Padua.⁴ In 1469 he married his first wife, the noblewoman Beatrice Costabili, in Ferrara. Renowned for his oratorical

and popular form both in city and country, yet Aristotle, chief of the Peripatetics, and a man of divine intellect, did not scorn to use it in his books”.

³ AULUS GELLIUS, *The Attic Nights*, trans. J. C. ROLFE, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, Mass., 1984, 2.29.1: “[...] cum quae utilia monitu suasuque erant, non severe neque imperiose praecepit et censuit, ut philosophis mos est, sed festivos delectabilesque apologos commentus, res salubriter ac prospicienter animadversas in mentes animosque hominum cum audiendi quadam inlecebra induit”.

⁴ Studies on Collenuccio’s life and work include: A. SAVIOTTI, *Pandolfo Collenuccio, umanista pesarese del sec. XV* (1888), reprint, Rome, 1974; C. VARESE, “Pandolfo Collenuccio umanista”, in *Storia e politica nella prosa del Quattrocento*, Turin, 1961, pp. 149-286; N. TANDA, *Pandolfo Collenuccio: Il dramma della “saviezza”*, Rome, 1988; and *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, 27, 1982, s.v. “Collenuccio, Pandolfo”, pp. 1-5.

skills, Collenuccio served as a diplomat and civic official for numerous Italian city-states: the Bentivoglio appointed him *giudice* to the *Disco dell'orso* in Bologna (1473-1474); he later rose to the position of *procuratore generale* in Pesaro for the Sforza; and in 1490, upon the invitation of Lorenzo de' Medici, he served as *Podestà* of Florence. After a brief employment as *Podestà* of Mantua, Collenuccio transferred permanently to Ferrara in 1491 with his second wife Lauretta. The Ferrarese duke Ercole I d'Este appointed him *consigliere ducale*; he also acted as the Este ambassador to Rome and to the imperial court. Collenuccio's dedication to the Este led Ercole I to nominate him *Capitano di Giustizia* in May of 1500. A versatile figure, Collenuccio immersed himself in the city's flourishing humanist culture and helped shape the direction of scholarship at court. Already in 1487 his vernacular translation of *Anfitrione* by the Roman playwright Plautus had been performed in Ferrara. Among the works he composed while in the employment of the Este are his *Pliniana defensio*, *Compendio de le Istorie del Regno di Napoli*, *Regola da piantar et conservar melaranci*, and the *Commedia di Iacob e di Ioseph*, a *sacra rappresentazione* that was performed in Ferrara on 28 and 31 March 1504. At Pesaro, by contrast, the humanist's personal and political fortunes had been highly unstable. Giovanni Sforza, the illegitimate son of Costanzo Sforza, imprisoned Collenuccio for eighteen months beginning in 1488 mainly because he had negotiated with Pope Sixtus IV to grant Giovanni control of the duchy under the condition of papal jurisdiction. Later, when Collenuccio attempted to visit family in Pesaro in 1504, he was imprisoned again by Giovanni Sforza, and subsequently executed on 11 June.

Between 1494 and 1499 Collenuccio composed his *Apologi* (fables). Four of these are in Latin: *Agenoria*, *Misopenes*, *Alithia*, and *Bombarda*, and they were first published collectively in 1511.⁵ The other two are in the vernacular: *Filotimo*, published in 1517, and *Specchio d'Esopo*, in 1526.⁶ All of the fables bear a dedication to

⁵ Collenuccio's Latin fables are reprinted in P. COLLENUCCIO, *Operette morali: Poesie latine e volgari*, ed. A. SAVIOTTI, Bari, 1929, with an additional examination of their genesis and publication history. All quotations from the Latin *apologi* are from this edition. According to Saviotti (p. 343), the fable *Agenoria* was first published independently in 1497; *Misopenes* in 1510, and *Alithia* in 1495 (or 1500).

⁶ The vernacular fables are also edited, with an examination of their early history, by

Duke Ercole I d'Este. These original texts assimilate conceits not only from the fables of Aesop, but also from the Roman comedies of Plautus, the satiric dialogues of Lucian, and the *Intercenales* (Dinner Pieces) of the Renaissance architect and humanist Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472).⁷ The dialogue *Specchio d'Esopo* is distinct among Collenuccio's writings: it offers an exposition on the ethical value of fables for a Renaissance prince and his courtiers through six interlocutors who converse with one another in a court setting. The protagonists are Ercole (Hercules), Esopo (Aesop), Plauto (Plautus), Luciano (Lucian), Blacico (the porter), and il Re (the prince), who, owing to the text's dedication, can be read as a figure for Ercole I d'Este. With the dialogue, Collenuccio forms an investigative community of interlocutors who discuss moral objectives by assimilating fables and other ancient proverbs into their own speech.⁸ At the heart of the work is an emphasis on how the reading and reciting of Aesop's fables can help one obtain Virtue and Truth (*Virtù* and *Verità*). The *specchio* (mirror) of the title is explained in the dialogue as a figure of the human soul: "L'anima umana, quando in questa mortal spoglia dal dator sommo de le forme si infonde, quasi come lucidissimo specchio ne viene atta a rappresentare le specie e imagini di tutte quelle cose che a lei si presentano [...]"⁹ This dialogue has

Saviotti (see note 5). All quotations from the *Specchio d'Esopo* and *Filotimo* are from P. COLLENUCCIO, *Apologhi in volgare*, ed. G. MASI, Rome, 1998, which contains useful philological notes. I have made some minor adjustments to the text for clarity.

⁷ Interpretations of Collenuccio's *apologi* are by S. ORLANDO, "L'ideologia umanistica negli *Apologi* di P. Collenuccio", in G. TARUGI (ed.), *Civiltà dell'umanesimo*, Florence, 1972, pp. 225-240; E. MATTIOLI, *Luciano e l'umanesimo*, Naples, 1980, pp. 113-126; S. PITTALUGA, "Note sul *Misopenes* di Pandolfo Collenuccio", *Res publica litterarum*, 7, 1984, pp. 171-180; VARESE, *op. cit.*, (see note 4), pp. 177-222; and TANDA, *op. cit.*, (see note 4), pp. 49-89. Collenuccio possessed a rare manuscript of Alberti's *Intercenales*, for which see L. D'ASCIA, "Humanistic Culture and Literary Invention in Ferrara at the Time of the Dossi", in L. CIAMMITTI-S. OSTROW-S. SETTIS (eds.), *Dosso's Fate: Painting and Court Culture in Renaissance Italy*, Los Angeles, 1998, pp. 309-332, esp. p. 309. For a study and translation of the *Intercenales*, see L. B. ALBERTI, *Dinner Pieces*, trans. D. MARSH, Binghamton, 1987. Collenuccio also modeled his *Specchio d'Esopo* after Plutarch's *Dinner of the Seven Wise Men*, in which Aesop appears as an advisor to Croesus, King of Lydia.

⁸ D. MARSH, *The Quattrocento Dialogue: Classical Tradition and Humanist Innovation*, Cambridge, Mass., 1980, discusses the structure and development of the humanist dialogue.

⁹ COLLENUCCIO (ed. MASI), *op. cit.* (see note 6), pp. 56-57: "The human soul, when clothed in this mortal form given to it by the highest giver of forms, infuses itself like a most

been relatively well served by interpretations, especially those of Alfredo Saviotti, Claudio Varese, and Nicola Tanda. I wish to emphasize the impact of its message within the literary and visual culture of Renaissance court society.

Collenuccio's *Specchio d'Esopo* opens with Hercules, a figure of virtue, greeting Aesop outside a royal court. Saddened, Aesop explains that he had sought the prince's audience, but was denied entrance into the court because the porters failed to recognize his "gifts" (*apologi*) as worthy offerings for the ruler. In order to express how unfairly he was treated, Aesop invents a fable of a nightingale whose melodic singing was judged inferior to the two-toned call of a cuckoo by a simple-minded jackass. Hercules, who is amused by the witty parallel, is reminded of the ancient proverb (here spoken in the vernacular): "Che ha da far l'asino con la lira?" (What has a jackass to do with a lyre?).¹⁰ The mythical hero agrees to escort Aesop into the court, past the unyielding porter, and further reassures him that the learned prince will not fail to recognize the value of his fables. He encourages Aesop to smile when they encounter the ushers and court officials in order to dissolve their mask of superiority: "Spaccia pur lor col riso, come la Volpe tua la mascara del mimo".¹¹ With this advice Hercules invokes the Aesopian fable "The Fox before the Tragic Actor's Mask", which reads as follows:

A fox, after looking by chance at a tragic actor's mask, remarked: "O what a majestic face is here, but it has no brains!"

This is a dictum for those to whom Fortune has granted rank and renown, but denied them common sense.¹²

Hercules counsels Aesop to learn from his own inventions – to assume the attitude of the clever fox and disdain the ignorant porter. Throughout Collenuccio's text the characters integrate Aesop's fables and other ancient proverbs into familiar conversation and

lucid mirror and becomes suitable for representing the types of images of all things that represent themselves to it [...]"

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 40. As Masi notes, this proverb was a favorite of Lucian; see, for instance, his *De mercede conductis potentium familiaribus*, p. 25.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹² *Phaedri Augusti fabularum Aesopiarum*, trans. B. E. PERRY, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, Mass., 1965, 1.7.

public speaking. The dialogue thus provides a theory as practice (or performance). Such a model appeals to the *Rhetoric* (1393a-1394a) by Aristotle, who defines fable as a type of argument by example. Aristotle stresses the pleasure and persuasiveness of hearing particular facts (invented or actual) that apply to general situations, and cites examples of Aesop's fables used in judicial oratory.¹³

Upon gaining entrance at court, the character Aesop converses with the Greek satirist Lucian and the Latin playwright Plautus. Aesop feels at home among this courtly entourage of ancient *letterati*. When he meets Lucian and Plautus for the first time, Aesop remarks to Hercules that they are delightful instructors of practical reason and virtue, stating: "sono omini d'ogni mano, dotti, acuti, umani, faceti, pronti, eleganti, destri et esperti, che con tanta dolcezza dimostrano le condizioni de la vita umana e insegnano costumi e virtù, che chi con loro pratica, pare a pena che mal omo possa essere".¹⁴ Through the conversational exchange of his interlocutors, Collenuccio reveals his distrust of scholastic philosophy (or logic) and inflated academic jargon. The character Lucian drives this point home when he introduces Aesop to the prince, praising the inventor of fables as a special breed of "philosopher" in the following manner:

Il nome di costui, o re, chiamano Esopo [...] et è filosofo, ma non come li altri che con sillogismi e longhe narrazioni e difficili mostrano a li omini la via de la virtù, facendo oscuro quel che molto chiaro esser dovería, e non facendo però con le opere quello che con la lingua insegnano. Ma ha trovato una nova via breve et espedita, per la quale pigliando argomento di

¹³ ARISTOTLE, *Rhetoric*, trans. W. R. ROBERTS, New York, 1954, 1394a: "Fables are suitable for addresses to popular assemblies; and they have one advantage – they are comparatively easy to invent, whereas it is hard to find parallels among actual past events. You will in fact frame them just as you frame illustrative parallels: all you require is the power of thinking out your analogy, a power developed by intellectual training".

¹⁴ COLLENUCCIO (ed. MASI), *op. cit.*, (see note 6), p. 49: "they are men capable of everything, cultivated, acute, humble, witty, prepared, elegant, skilled, and expert, who with such sweetness reveal the conditions of human existence and teach proper customs and virtues that, for those who train with them, it barely seems possible to be a bad man". This passage is discussed by K. SIDWELL, "Qui miscuit utile dulci": La fortuna delle opere di Luciano nella società del Quattrocento Italiano", in *Homo sapiens, homo humanus: Letteratura, arte e scienza nella seconda metà del Quattrocento*, Florence, 1990, vol. 2, pp. 449-459, esp. p. 453.

cose umili e naturali, con dolci esempi dimostra quello che a li omini sia utile.¹⁵

Lucian's words demonstrate that Renaissance humanists valued Aesop's fables for their *brevitas*: the ability to compress wisdom and experience and apply it to practical questions. Collenuccio champions the fables because they relocate virtuous activity within the intimate network of social bonds and the habits of daily life. As a humanist dialogue, the *Specchio d'Esopo* provides the reader seeking ethical guidance with exemplary deeds and model courtly behavior rather than with arcane philosophical doctrine. In addition, the above passage refers to Horace's dictum "omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci" (He has won every vote who has blended profit with pleasure) from the *Ars poetica* (343).¹⁶ The *Specchio d'Esopo* testifies to the literary prestige of fables and demonstrates how they facilitate practical experience and quotidian reasoning.

When Collenuccio praises the relative merits of Aesop's fables in his *Specchio d'Esopo*, he reveals the vernacular's importance for the experience of classical literature at the Este court. To be sure, translating the ancient fables from Greek into Latin constituted an enriching philological activity for such early Renaissance humanists as Gregorio Correr, Ermolao Barbaro, Lorenzo Valla, Ognibene da Lonigo, and most notably Guarino da Verona, who moved to Ferrara in 1429 where he educated the Este and served as a professor at the university until his death in 1460.¹⁷ In 1437 Leon Battista

¹⁵ COLLENUCCIO (ed. MASI), *op. cit.* (see note 6), pp. 51-52: "Dear Prince, this is the man they call Aesop [...] and he is a philosopher, but not like the others, who with their syllogisms and long and difficult discourses try to show the path to virtue, making obscure that which should be clear, and being unable to demonstrate the practicality of that which they teach. Instead, he has found a new way, brief and expedient, through which, by unfolding the argument of humble and natural things, he shows with sweet examples that which is useful to men".

¹⁶ HORACE, *Ars Poetica*, trans. H. R. FAIRCLOUGH, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, Mass., 1966, p. 343.

¹⁷ On the importance of Aesop's fables for Renaissance humanists in Italy and beyond, I have consulted S. I. CAMPOREALE, *Lorenzo Valla: umanesimo e teologia*, Florence, 1972, esp. p. 174; C. FINCH, "The Renaissance Adaptation of Aesop's *Fables* by Gregorius Corrarius", *Classical Bulletin*, 49, 1973, pp. 44-48; J. BERRIGAN, "The *Libellus Fabellarum* of Gregorio Correr", *Manuscripta*, 19, 1975, pp. 131-138; R. GALLI, *The First Humanist Translations of Aesop*, Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 1978; M. FUMA-

Alberti composed one hundred Latin fables in imitation of Aesop in which he strove for richness of response through linguistic brevity. Alberti dedicated his fables to the influential Ferrarese canon Francesco Marescalco. With his dedication, he sought, and subsequently achieved, close personal ties with the Este court.¹⁸ Alberti's own fables informed the writings of Celio Calcagnini (1479-1541), the Este court historian and chair of the faculty of rhetoric at the University of Ferrara. Calcagnini himself composed one hundred Latin fables cherished for their ironic look at human existence.¹⁹ Yet it is important to note that by the last quarter of the fifteenth century, which saw the advent of printing, a much broader audience – ranging from princes to courtiers, schoolchildren to humanists, lay to religious peoples – encountered the fables primarily in the vernacular, not in the original Greek or Latin.²⁰ The earliest and most popular vernacular translation printed in Italy was the edition published by Giovanni and Alberto Alvise in Verona on 26 June 1479: *Aesopus moralisatus, latine et italice*.²¹ The various inventories of the Este library record

ROLI, "Les 'Fables' et la tradition humaniste de l'apologue ésopique", in M. FUMAROLI (ed.), *La Fontaine: 'Fables'*, Paris, 1985, pp. 73-92; E. FAHY-B. MCTIGUE, *The Medici Aesop*, New York, 1989; and A. PATTERSON, *Fables of Power: Aesopian Writing and Political History*, Durham-London, 1991.

¹⁸ P. TESTI MASSETANI, "Ricerche sugli *Apologi* di Leon Battista Alberti", *Rinascimento*, 12, 1972, pp. 79-133. In his dedication, Alberti begged Marescalco to have patience if the fables seem obscure, for obscurity often accompanies condensed elocution (*brevitas*). It is precisely this brevity that Alberti strove to achieve and painstakingly researched; in this format he guarantees that the fables can be read repeatedly with increased attention, providing much pleasure and revealing insight through their application. For Alberti's quest to gain favor with the Este through his literary practice, see A. GRAFTON, *Leon Battista Alberti: Master Builder of the Italian Renaissance*, New York, 2000, pp. 189-224.

¹⁹ C. CALCAGNINI, *Apologi caeliani*, in *Opera aliquot*, Basel, 1544, pp. 625-640. A study of Calcagnini's fables in their literary context is offered by S. PRANDI, "Celio Calcagnini, Ortensio Lando e la prosa morale degli apologhi", *Schede umanistiche*, 1, 1994, pp. 83-93.

²⁰ V. BRANCA (ed.), in *Esopo toscano dei frati e mercanti trecenteschi*, Venice, 1989, discusses how merchant and religious communities in fourteenth-century Tuscany adapted the fables of Aesop and accompanying morals to suit their respective professions.

²¹ This edition, which is illustrated with woodcuts, contains the Latin verse translation of the Greek fables transcribed by Gualtherius Anglicus (12th century?), accompanied by a vernacular translation in double sonnet (*sonetto materiale* and *sonetto morale*) by Accio Zucco of Sommacampagna. Studies on this famous edition include: G. MARDERSTEIG, *Liberale ritrovato nell'Esopo Veronese del 1479*, Verona, 1973; and L. DONATI, "Osservazioni sull'Esopo di Verona, 26 June 1479", *Gutenberg Jahrbuch*, 1976, pp. 138-146.

that it housed both a Latin and a vernacular edition of Aesop's fables.²² What is more, the impressive scope of classical texts translated into the vernacular at Ferrara, including the works of Lucian and Plautus, testifies to the newly emerging literary forms and conventions in which the truth of ancient experience becomes absorbed and assimilated into a modern and shared language. Colenuccio's *Specchio d'Esopo* is just one example of the sophistication the vernacular could achieve, illustrating what Carlo Dionisotti considered the vernacular's "aristocratic" status as a courtly language.²³ That Colenuccio chooses the language of the vernacular to discuss the relative merits of Aesop's fables upholds their wide cultural value as both communal and courtly possession.

The dialogue *Specchio d'Esopo* is an essential Renaissance text that demonstrates the uses of Aesop's fables as agents of moral and cultural exchange. In the dialogue the prince asks for whom the "fruits" of Aesop's labors might be useful and advantageous. Aesop explains that the prince can use them for his pleasure because, being of noble birth, he already possesses learning, whereas his courtiers need them in order to "clear away and burnish their mirrors" so that they may see reflected in them the "V V":

Ma li toi familiari e ministri, che tanta esperienza e dono dal ciel non hanno, ad altro usare non li deveno né possono, che a purgare e a brunire li loro specchi, li quali netti e bruniti che siano, perspicuamente vederanno quelli dui 'V V', li quali tu ora possiedi: e allora essendo, come tu ora, sanati, ne potranno con voluttà gustare e l'acquistata sanità mantenere.²⁴

²² G. BERTONI, *La biblioteca estense e la coltura ferrarese ai tempi del Duca Ercole I (1471-1505)*, Turin, 1903, p. 221, no. 103 [1467]: "Exopus fabulosus non eo modo quo sunt illi quibus utimur sed diverso versibus exametius"; p. 241, no. 192 [1495]: "Fabule de Jsoppo in vulgare coperto de brasilo stampato". For an additional study of the Este library, see A. QUONDAM, "Le biblioteche della corte estense", in A. QUONDAM (ed.), *Il libro a corte*, Rome, 1994, pp. 7-38.

²³ C. DIONISOTTI, *Geografia e storia della letteratura italiana*, Turin, 1967, pp. 125-178. Dennis Looney demonstrates how the activity of translating classical texts into the vernacular had a direct impact on the writings of such Ferrarese authors as Matteo Maria Boiardo and Ludovico Ariosto; see D. LOONEY, *Compromising the Classics: Romance Epic Narrative in the Italian Renaissance*, Detroit, 1996.

²⁴ COLLENUCCIO (ed. MASI), *op. cit.* (see note 6), pp. 54-55: "However, your courtiers and ministers, who do not possess such experience and heavenly gifts, must use [my fables] for no other reason than to purge and burnish their mirrors, in which, no matter how clear

The imagined “V V” reflected in the mirror of the soul is Colleenuccio’s own remarkable invention. These initials appear in bold majuscules in the early manuscripts, as in the one dedicated and delivered to the Medici Pope Leo X in 1513 by Pandolfo’s son Teodoro Colleenuccio (Figs. 1 and 2).²⁵ This manuscript testifies to the circulation of the dialogue within the papal states, a point to which we shall return below. At this stage in the narrative, the prince accepts the fables with a good heart, praising their universality and efficacy. It is clear that Colleenuccio is playing upon the literary genre of the *speculum principis* (the mirror of the prince), texts written as guides to the education of a prince that combine ethics and political instruction. The metaphor of the mirror as reflection of divine truth also has scriptural authority in the Book of Wisdom (7.26): “For [Wisdom] is [...] an unspotted mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness”.²⁶ When prompted by Lucian and Plautus to clarify the meaning of Aesop’s words, the prince states that fables clear away vice more easily and more enjoyably than scholastic studies, like medicine sweetened with fruit:

Il che vedendo il nostro Esopo, una facile, dolce e natural via, sì come l’asprezza de la medicina con la dolcezza del melle si temprà, par che trovato abbia di questi suavissimi soi frutti *Apologi*: che con umile modo veri esempli ad esser gustati invitano, e poi teneramente inducono chi lor gustano a purgare e polire li lor specchi e al primo suo splendore ridurli; acciò che purificati quelli le vere immagini referendo, quelle due antiquissime sorelle Virtù e Verità, [le] quali esso per li dui ‘V V’ designar volle, ne l’anima sì prestino e così al suo principio felicemente la rendino.²⁷

and glistening, perspicuously they can see the two “V V”, which you already possess. And hence being healed, as you are now, they will be able to enjoy them with great delight and maintain their improved moral health”.

²⁵ I have consulted the manuscript now housed in the Biblioteca Palatina of Parma (MS. Palatino 256). Another manuscript of the dialogue exists in the Vatican Library (Vaticano-Urbinate 1228). On these two manuscripts, see COLLENUCCIO (ed. SAVIOTTI), *op. cit.* (see note 5), pp. 358-359.

²⁶ Translation from *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, ed. R. H. CHARLES, Oxford, 1983, vol. 1, p. 547 (The Book of Wisdom, 7.26).

²⁷ COLLENUCCIO (ed. MASI), *op. cit.* (see note 6), p. 58: “Therefore, our Aesop, seeing a simple, sweet, and natural path, just as the bitterness of medicine is tempered by the sweetness of fruit, seems to have found this in his most elegant fruitful fables, which through humble ways and truthful examples invite a tasting, and then gently induce those who taste them to purgare and polish their mirrors and return them to their former splendor.

The prince recognizes the fables as a compendium of accumulated ancient wisdom, able to impress moral values upon the heart and mind as well as upon the soul of the practitioner. The characteristics of Collenuccio's prince resemble those of the wise King Robert of Sicily as discussed by Boccaccio. By means of the prince's elucidation of the initials "V V", which again stand out in the text (Fig. 3), Collenuccio conceives of an ethical and efficacious court society in which courtiers imitate their ruler and master fabulist discourse.

The impact of Collenuccio's idealist agenda can be measured, in part, if we turn our attention to a group of portraits from the early sixteenth century. Let us first consider three well-known paintings: Giorgione's *Portrait of a Young Man* (Berlin) (Fig. 5), painted around 1505 and showing a man whose arm rests on a parapet inscribed "V V";²⁸ the *Portrait of a Young Man* (Budapest) from the circle of Giorgione of ca. 1508 (Fig. 6), which displays a single "V" on a parapet along with other symbols;²⁹ and the *Portrait of a Gentleman* (Washington) inscribed "V V O" on the parapet (Fig. 7), a painting often attributed to Titian or Giorgione but most likely painted between 1515 and 1520 by the artist Giovanni Cariani.³⁰ Questions concerning attribution,

So that, purified, they will reflect true images, those two most ancient sisters Virtue and Truth, represented by "V V", which lend themselves to the soul and hence happily return the soul to its original state".

²⁸ See the entry on this painting by A. BALLARIN in *Le siècle de Titien: L'âge d'or de la peinture à Venise*, exh. cat., Paris, 1993, pp. 297-299; and J. ANDERSON, *Giorgione: The Painter of 'Poetic Brevity'*, Paris-New York, 1997, pp. 296-297.

²⁹ The painting is studied by F. RICHARDSON in J. MARTINEAU-C. HOPE (eds.), *The Genius of Venice 1500-1600*, exh. cat., London, 1983, p. 171; D. A. BROWN in *Leonardo and Venice*, exh. cat., Milan, 1992, p. 342; BALLARIN, *op. cit.* (see note 28), pp. 324-328; and ANDERSON, *op. cit.*, (see note 28), p. 307.

³⁰ See R. PALLUCCHINI, "Il restauro del ritratto di gentiluomo veneziano K. 475 della National Gallery of Art di Washington", *Arte Veneta*, 16, 1962, pp. 234-237; BALLARIN, *op. cit.* (see note 28), pp. 375-378; and ANDERSON, *op. cit.*, (see note 28), p. 345, who, based on the expert opinion of David Alan Brown, attributes this painting to Giovanni Cariani, a painter born in San Giovanni Bianco near Bergamo, but who worked extensively in Venice. According to F. R. SHAPLEY, *Catalogue of the Italian Paintings*, Washington, 1979, vol. 1, pp. 213-216, the artist made several changes to his composition: "The sitter's right hand at first grasped the hilt of a sword or dagger. Then the weapon was painted out, and a scroll was put into the hand. At this time, apparently, the parapet was painted in and the book was added between the parapet and the hand. Finally, a crumpled handkerchief was substituted for the scroll".

date, and the identity of the sitters surround each work; their early provenance is obscure as well. The remainder of this study will focus on the iconography of these portraits, which might in turn shed light on these important issues.

There have been numerous attempts to interpret the significance of the letters “V V” in these portraits.³¹ Some have suggested that the letters stand for “Vanitas Vanitatum”, or perhaps represent the initials of the unidentified sitters. In a thoughtful study published in 1975, Nancy Thomson de Grummond attempted to demonstrate that the letter “V” “in every case stands for some form of the Latin adjective *vivus*, ‘living,’ or its cognate verb, *vivere*, ‘to live,’ and that the artists, in using the letters “V V”, were reviving Roman Classical traditions of portraiture”.³² She claimed that the letters derived from epigraphic abbreviations on ancient funerary monuments, and could possibly abbreviate *V[ivens] V[ivo]* or *V[ivens] V[iv]O*, (The living [made it] for the living), or simply *Vivens* in the case of the single “V”. However, there is no ancient precedent showing the initials “V V” in isolation, but always in the context of longer sepulchral inscriptions. Although Thomson de Grummond argued that the letters may reflect the artist’s attempt to immortalize a sitter (and himself) through his practice, in the end she equivocates on whether or not these are posthumous portraits. David Rosand, who endorsed the interpretation “Vivens Vivo”, asserted that “V V” acknowledges “the inevitable death of the subject”, and refers “to the passing of time and thereby directly confronts the fact of death”.³³ Most recently, Jaynie Anderson, in her discussion of Giorgione’s Berlin portrait, sees the youth’s pink jacket as “flamboyant” and claims that it transgresses sumptuary laws, “which could lead us to believe any of the

³¹ H. WETHEY, *The Paintings of Titian. II. The Portraits*, London, 1971, p. 11, n. 56, provides a very useful summary of the prevailing arguments up to 1971.

³² N. THOMSON DE GRUMMOND, “V V and Related Inscriptions in Giorgione, Titian, and Dürer”, *The Art Bulletin*, 57, 1975, pp. 346-356. J. CRANSTON, *The Poetics of Portraiture in the Italian Renaissance*, Cambridge, 2000, pp. 15-60, develops Thomson de Grummond’s hypothesis on the “V V” portraits into her own thesis. She discusses the power of these portraits to stage a dialogue with the beholder regarding permanence, perseverance, finality, and memory.

³³ D. ROSAND, “The Portrait, the Courtier, and Death”, in R. HANNING-D. ROSAND (eds.), *Castiglione: The Ideal and the Real in Renaissance Culture*, New Haven-London, 1983, pp. 91-129.

following possibilities: *Veniet Venus*, or *Veneris victor* or *Victor vecundus*, but is any one more credible than another?"³⁴

Yet if we interpret the letters "V V" in the vernacular, instead of Latin, we can relate the enigmatic imagery of the portraits to the striking symbolism found in Collenuccio's *Specchio d'Esopo*. The dialogue encourages a reading of these portraits in relation to the role of Aesop's fables within court culture and the culture of self-fashioning. It follows that these portraits are "mirrors" in which the sitter displays the Virtue and Truth – *Virtù* and *Verità* – obtained by integrating Aesop's fables into daily discourse. The imagery of these portraits coincides with the development of the Italian *impresa*, and may well be deliberately arcane and readable only to the informed spectator, which in turn elevates the sitter's intellectual and moral prowess.³⁵ An audience familiar with Collenuccio's *Specchio d'Esopo* would be encouraged to think that the sitter possesses virtue and truth. "V V" therefore becomes a kind of intellectual livery: the letters ostensibly advertise the "fruits" of the individual's soul. What is more, they are legible both "backwards" and "forwards", as if the portrait were in fact a mirror reflection. The mirror metaphor imagined by Collenuccio was commonly associated with the genre of portraiture. In 1543 Claudio Tolomei wrote the artist Sebastiano del Piombo to request a portrait he called a "divine mirror" (*specchio divino*). According to Tolomei, the portrait (which has not been located) will enable him to discern the virtuous merits of the painter within Tolomei's own likeness: "you, because I will perceive in my image your ability and your marvelous skill; me, because I will see my image which will constantly stimulate me to purge my soul of its many shortcomings; not only in this respect, for which Socrates desired youths to look at themselves in the mirror, but

³⁴ ANDERSON, *op. cit.* (see note 28), p. 297.

³⁵ Paolo Giovio defined the Italian *impresa* as neither too obscure nor too obvious to decipher: "[...] ch'ella non sia oscura di sorte ch'abbia mestiero della sibilla per interpretare a volerla intendere, né tanto chiara ch'ogni plebeo l'intenda"; P. GIOVIO, *Dialogo dell'impresa militari e amorose*, ed. M. L. DOGLIO, Rome, 1978, p. 37. The bibliography on the Italian *impresa* is vast, but the topic is well addressed by R. KLEIN, "The Theory of Figurative Expression in Italian Treatises on the *Impresa*", in *Form and Meaning: Essays on the Renaissance and Modern Art*, trans. M. JAY-L. WIESELTIER, Princeton, 1981, pp. 3-24; and K. LIPPINCOTT, "The Genesis and Significance of the Fifteenth-Century Italian *Impresa*", in S. ANGLO (ed.), *Chivalry in the Renaissance*, Woodbridge, 1990, pp. 49-84.

moreover, for the very reason that I can see in it the many luminous rays of your virtue; it will fire my soul with a fine desire for honor and glory".³⁶ Tolomei's appeal to the Socratic philosophy "Know thyself" corresponds not only to the "V V" portraits, but also to a related allegorical panel painted by the Venetian artist Giovanni Bellini around 1490 (Venice). Bellini depicts a female personification of Truth as naked, standing on a pedestal; she holds a mirror and points to a blurred reflection of a man in the glass (Fig. 8). The reflection incites the beholder to contemplate his own spotted image, which is in need of polishing through education in virtue and truth.³⁷

Instead of representing individuals who contemplate death, the "V V" portraits, when read in conjunction with Collenuccio's *Specchio d'Esopo*, more plausibly display the accumulation of certain fundamental insights and attitudes essential to the political success of a courtier. Consider Baldesar Castiglione's *Il libro del Cortegiano* (published in 1528), a fictive dialogue that purports to take place in 1507 at the court of Urbino. In book four, the protagonist Ottaviano Fregoso emphasizes the necessity of moral virtue for a courtier, the seed of which is "enclosed and planted in our souls", before being brought out and "cultivated" by education.³⁸ Only by possessing

³⁶ Cited and discussed by L. CAMPBELL, *Renaissance Portraits: European Portrait-Painting in the 14th, 15th, and 16th Centuries*, New Haven-London, 1990, p. 195. An excerpt of the original letter is reprinted in L. DUSSLER, *Sebastiano del Piombo*, Basel, 1942, pp. 212-213: "Solo vi diro, che quando da voi mi negan gratia (come spero) alhora mi parerà haver guadagnato uno specchio, il quale io sempre chiamarò specchio divino, perciocché in quello vedrò voi, e me stesso insieme. Voi vedendo ne l'imagin mia la vostra singular virtù, e 'l vostro maraviglioso artificio. Me, vedendo nell'arte vostra espressa vivamente la mia imagine, laquale sarà continuo stimolo a purgare l'anima di molti suoi mancamenti; non solo per quel rispetto, per loqual Socrate voleva che i gioveni si guardassero nello specchio, ma molto più, perciocché vedendovi dentro molti luminosi raggi delle vostre virtù; mi s'accenderà l'anima a bel desiderio d'honore e di gloria". On the symbolism of the mirror in portraiture, see H. SCHWARZ, "The Mirror in Art", *Renaissance Quarterly*, 15, 1952, pp. 97-118; K. T. BROWN, *The Painter's Reflection: Self-Portraiture in Renaissance Venice 1458-1625*, Florence, 2000, pp. 45-55; and CRANSTON, *op. cit.* (see note 32), pp. 127-167.

³⁷ The image is one in a series of five allegories painted by Bellini now in the Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice. The meaning of these panels has been much debated; see R. GOFFEN, *Giovanni Bellini*, New Haven-London, 1989, pp. 226-237; and A. TEMPESTINI, *Giovanni Bellini: Catalogo completo dei dipinti*, Florence, 1992, pp. 194-196.

³⁸ B. CASTIGLIONE, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. C. S. SINGLETON, Garden City, 1959, esp. pp. 297-298: "For if it is to pass to action and to a perfect operation, nature alone does not suffice, as has been said, but the practice of art and reason is required to purify and clear the soul by lifting from it the dark veil of ignorance, from which almost all the errors of men proceed [...]"

moral fortitude and cognitive alertness can a courtier properly instruct a prince. Accordingly, the subjects of the “V V” portraits display gestures that evoke confidence, reflection, and conviction, thereby contributing to the construction of an idealized self. John Pope-Hennessy argued that such images helped to shape an artistic revolution; they are at one and the same time “literary” and convey what Leonardo da Vinci called “the motions of the mind”.³⁹ Both artist and sitter would expect the beholder to contemplate the portrait while reading “V V” in the vernacular – the language of the courtier that defined his personal conduct and professional existence as advisor to the prince.

The symbolic meaning of the letters “V V” underscores the protean qualities of the courtier, who, like Pandolfo Colenuccio himself, had to perform multiple, often overlapping roles: educator, orator, diplomat, poet, and so on. In the *Specchio d'Esopo*, Colenuccio stresses the importance of the humanist-courtier who lends his literary skills to enhance the prince's image. As the character Hercules escorts Aesop to the royal court, along the way the mythical hero praises a new city (*città nova*) where the citizens have constructed a temple in his honor, and in which one finds an altar dedicated to the Muses. The figure of Hercules had local importance for the Este court; Duke Ercole I – because of his namesake – identified himself and his “labors” allegorically with the myth of Hercules, a process validated by numerous writings and propagandistic images.⁴⁰ One of the Ercole I's greatest accomplishments was the

³⁹ J. POPE-HENNESSY, *The Portrait in the Renaissance*, Washington, 1966, pp. 132-138. Such images are central to the study of Renaissance psychology of self-representation, what Harry Berger, Jr. calls “the fiction of the pose” in his essay “Fictions of the Pose: Facing the Gaze of Early Modern Portraiture”, *Representations*, 46, 1994, pp. 87-120. According to Berger's thesis, the sitter is both subject and participant in the act of portrayal, working in conjunction with the artist, his or her first observer. John Shearman also addresses the relationship between image and beholder in light of Renaissance portraiture in his book *Only Connect... Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance*, Washington, 1992, pp. 108-148.

⁴⁰ See W. GUNDERSHEIMER, *Art and Life at the Court of Ercole I d'Este: The 'De triumphis religionis' of Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti*, Geneva, 1972, esp. p. 31; and ID., *Ferrara: The Style of a Renaissance Despotism*, Princeton, 1973, pp. 173-228, for a sensitive overview of Ercole I's rule. For the myth of Hercules, see in particular G. FERRARI, “La corte degli dei: La ripresa del mito di Ercole nella Ferrara di Ercole I d'Este (1471-1505)”, in C. MOZZARELLI (ed.), *'Familia' del principe e famiglia aristocratica*, Rome, 1988, vol. 2, pp. 695-710.

so-called Herculean Addition to Ferrara, a civic expansion that was part of a broader program of land reclamation and urban renewal.⁴¹ In his study of Collenuccio's writings, Claudio Varese recognized the *città nova* in the *Specchio d'Esopo* as a reference to the duke's Herculean Addition.⁴² The dialogue thus offers a double tribute to the Este duke through the two protagonists, Ercole and il Re, both of whom embody virtue. The connection is significant: in the dialogue Aesop exclaims how the virtue of great personalities like Hercules is nothing without the prudence and diligence of letters to immortalize it – hence the appearance of the altar dedicated to the Muses in his temple.⁴³ In light of this message, the “V V” portraits belong to a verbal and visual nexus designed to commend princely deeds.

The “V” on the Budapest portrait may stand for either virtue or truth. The conspicuous letter – which appears on a hat – is shown in relation to another symbol that represents the personification of three-headed Prudence surrounded by a wreath denoting the four seasons.⁴⁴ A look at Collenuccio's *Agenoria*, one of his Latin fables that was first published separately in 1497, provides a context for interpretation. The fable relates how the male personification of Labor marries Agenoria, goddess of diligence. Together they have

⁴¹ On the Herculean Addition, see C. ROSENBERG, *The Este Monuments and Urban Development in Renaissance Ferrara*, Cambridge, 1997, pp. 130-152; T. TUOHY, *Herculean Ferrara: Ercole I d'Este, 1471-1505, and the Invention of a Ducal Capital*, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 121-154; and GUNDERSHEIMER, *Art and Life*, *op. cit.* (see note 40), pp. 72-76. In 1493, Ercole I struck a silver *testone* coin showing the portrait of the duke on the obverse, and the swamp-dwelling, seven headed hydra on the reverse – a reference to his draining marshlands in order to construct a new Ferrara. On this coin and its symbolic currency with the labors of Hercules, see P. GRIERSON, “Ercole I d'Este and Leonardo da Vinci's Equestrian Statue of Francesco Sforza”, *Italian Studies*, 14, 1959, pp. 40-48; and L. SYSON, “Circulating a Likeness? Coin Portraits in Late Fifteenth-Century Italy”, in N. MANN-L. SYSON (eds.), *The Image of the Individual: Portraits in the Renaissance*, London, 1998, pp. 113-125, esp. p. 123.

⁴² VARESE, *op. cit.* (see note 4), p. 217.

⁴³ COLLENUCCIO (ed. MASI), *op. cit.* (see note 6), pp. 42-43: “Quanto ha ben veduto la savia vetustà col far commune a te e a le Muse l'altare, a dare esempio che la virtù de' grandi omini è seputa, se la prudenza e diligenza de li omini letterati non la tien viva e immortale!”.

⁴⁴ A faded inscription on the parapet which supposedly identifies the sitter, “ANTONIVS BRO[KAR]DUS MARE”, is dismissed in the literature because of its dubious authenticity; see most recently ANDERSON, *op. cit.* (see note 28), p. 307.

seven children whose names all begin with "V": Vita, Valentia, Virtus, Victoria, Vbertas, Veritas, and Voluptas.⁴⁵ Jupiter wishes that, of all their children, Veritas and Voluptas be veiled on earth and unveiled in heaven, so that only those of superior ingenuity can discern their presence and distinguish between them. Once again, the letter "V" stands out in the text. This is evident in another elegant manuscript delivered to Pope Leo X in 1513 by Teodoro Colenuccio (Fig. 4). Here the names of the children appear in the red letters in the margins.⁴⁶ From a philological point of view, Pandolfo Colenuccio was fascinated with the letter "V" because it appears only in the Roman alphabet, and not in the Greek. In an undated letter addressed to his personal friend Cesare Nappi of Bologna, he discusses the literary potential and symbolic meaning of the letter "V" in his fables. He notes that the names Virtus and Veritas from his fable *Agenoria* depend on classical notions of labor and study.⁴⁷ Colenuccio's explanation to Nappi also shows that his conception of the letter "V" was gaining wide recognition among literary circles in the papal states. On one level of interpretation then, the "V" on the parapet of the Budapest portrait acknowledges the subject's grasp of *Veritas* (or obtainment of *Virtus*) through prudence and diligent study.

We can develop our reading further by noting that the hat shares a common iconography with Colenuccio's other vernacular fable *Filotimo*, a dialogue that satirizes the hypocrisy of status-seekers and social climbers at court. The fable, originally composed in 1497, sets the stage for an amusing dialogue between a head (Testa) and a hat (Berretta). The voice of the head displays vainglory coupled by obsequious behavior whereas the hat exemplifies the voice of prudence, exposing the head's empty speech. Towards the end of the piece, the head and hat encounter none other than Ercole (read

⁴⁵ COLLENUCCIO (ed. SAVIOTTI), *op. cit.* (see note 5), p. 16.

⁴⁶ The manuscript which I consulted is also housed in the Biblioteca Palatina of Parma (MS Parmense 751); see COLLENUCCIO (ed. SAVIOTTI), *op. cit.* (see note 5), p. 339.

⁴⁷ The undated letter is published in COLLENUCCIO (ed. SAVIOTTI), *op. cit.* (see note 5), pp. 346-350, esp. p. 347: "Virtus, cum circa arduum difficileque vertitur (ut Aristoteles inquit et Hesiodus), sine labore haberi non potest; [...] Veritas, non nisi studio et experientia quaeritur: studium autem cum labore est; unde philosophos pro veritate laborasse Lactantius, Eusebius et omnes scribunt".

Ercole I d'Este), who speaks with the voice of reason. Hercules denounces ignorance and empty ambition and professes the necessity of seeking virtue (*virtù*) and honor (*onore*). It follows that the "V" and the hat form an emblematic hieroglyph: they ornament the image of a courtier who wishes to serve his wise prince faithfully with virtue and prudence.

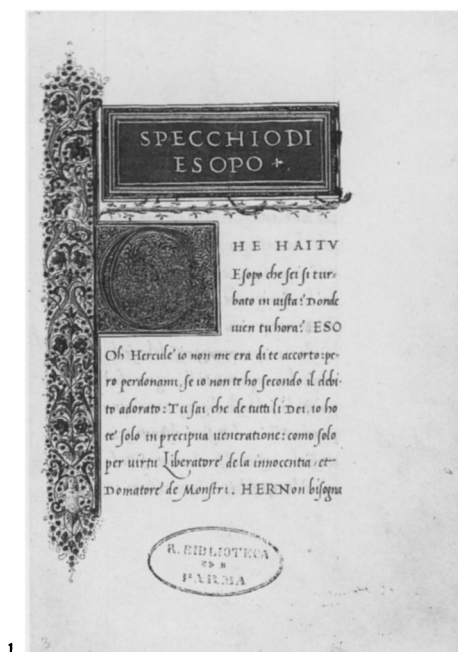
Turning to the Washington portrait, it has been argued that the inscription "V V O" abbreviates the generic Latin phrase *Virtus Vincit Omnia*.⁴⁸ While this interpretation is certainly plausible, another look at Collenuccio's *Filotimo* suggests that the "O" may stand for the "Onore" (Honor) that accompanies intellectual and moral *Virtù*. In the fable, the hat asks Hercules to explain and give examples of true honor (*vero onore*). The mythical hero defines *onore* as a product of excellent *virtù*, both intellectual and moral, that encompasses dutiful public service, magnanimous and generous actions for the common good, participation in the arts, and praise of just rulers.⁴⁹ Hercules explains that in order to signify the wisdom and prudence of their Republic, the Romans constructed the temples of Virtue and Honor together in such a way that one had to pass through the temple of *Virtù* (Virtue) in order to reach the temple of *Onore* (Honor).⁵⁰ Given this literary context, it would appear that the artist and sitter of the Washington portrait collaborated to gloss the visual aspects of Collenuccio's *Specchio d'Esopo* with the ethical guidance of his *Filotimo*. The resulting image – a carefully posed portrait that engages the beholder – portrays the subject with the two types of virtue necessary to achieve honor for himself, and more importantly, for his prince.

"V V" and its variants profess local *concetti* intimately related to

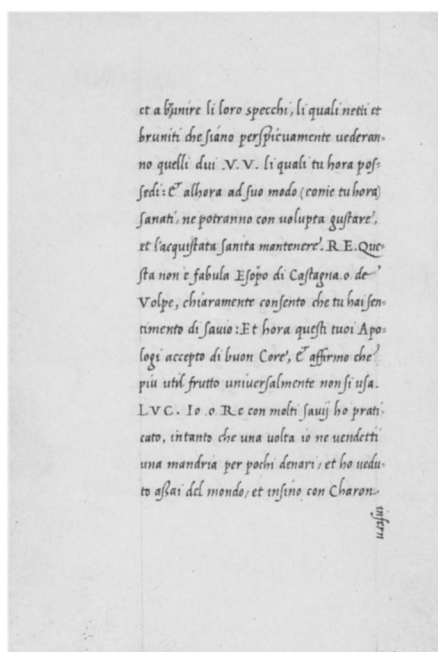
⁴⁸ See BALLARIN, *op. cit.* (see note 28), p. 376.

⁴⁹ The character Ercule summarizes in the following manner: "Pure devi sapere che sono di due specie e due maniere di virtù. Alcune sono chiamate intellettive, come arte, scienza, prudenza, intelletto e sapienza: e qualunque omo che alcuna di queste eccellentemente possiede, d'ogni onore veramente degno chiamare si può; per queste li sublimi artefici, li studiosi filosofi, li prudenti governatori de le città, li dotti omini savi e contemplativi sempre onorati sono stati. Un'altra specie di virtù son nominate morali, e queste, ove notabilmente sian poste, meritamente li soi possessori fan degni di onore; per questi li omini forti, li mansueti, li temperati, li iusti, li veridici, li magnifici e simili, e sopra tutto li magnanimi e liberali, sono onorati"; COLLENUCCIO (ed. MASI), *op. cit.* (see note 6), pp. 110-111.

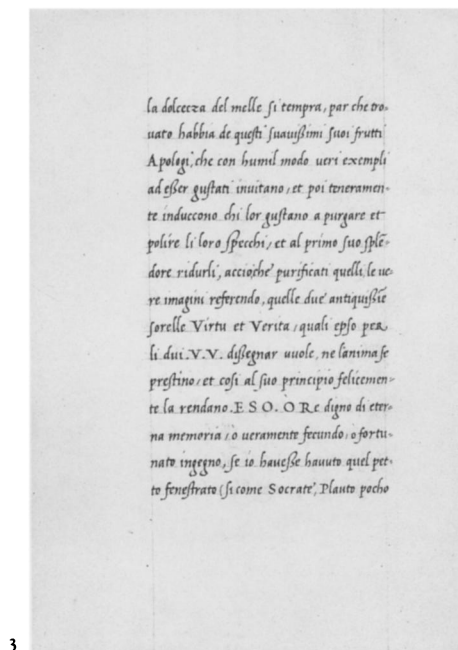
⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 112.



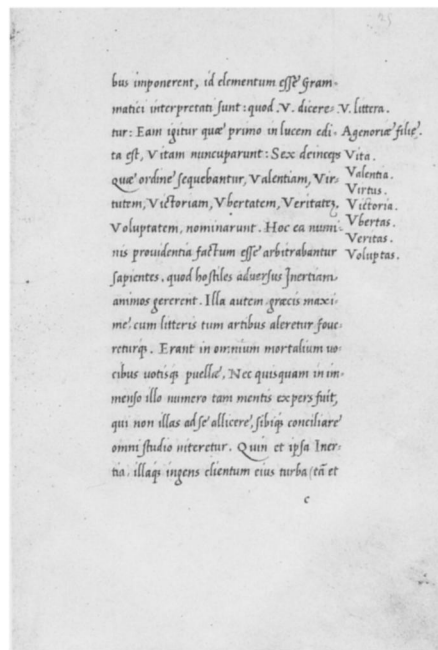
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Fig. 1. *Specchio d'Esopo*, MS Palatino 256, title page (fol. 3r). Parma, Biblioteca Palatina.

Fig. 2. *Specchio d'Esopo*, MS Palatino 256, fol. 20v. Parma, Biblioteca Palatina.

Fig. 3. *Specchio d'Esopo*, MS Palatino 256, fol. 23v. Parma, Biblioteca Palatina.

Fig. 4. *Agenoria*, MS Parmense 751, fol. 25r. Parma, Biblioteca Palatina.



Fig. 5. GIORGIONE, *Portrait of a Young Man*, canvas, 58 by 46 cm. Berlin, Staatliche Museen.

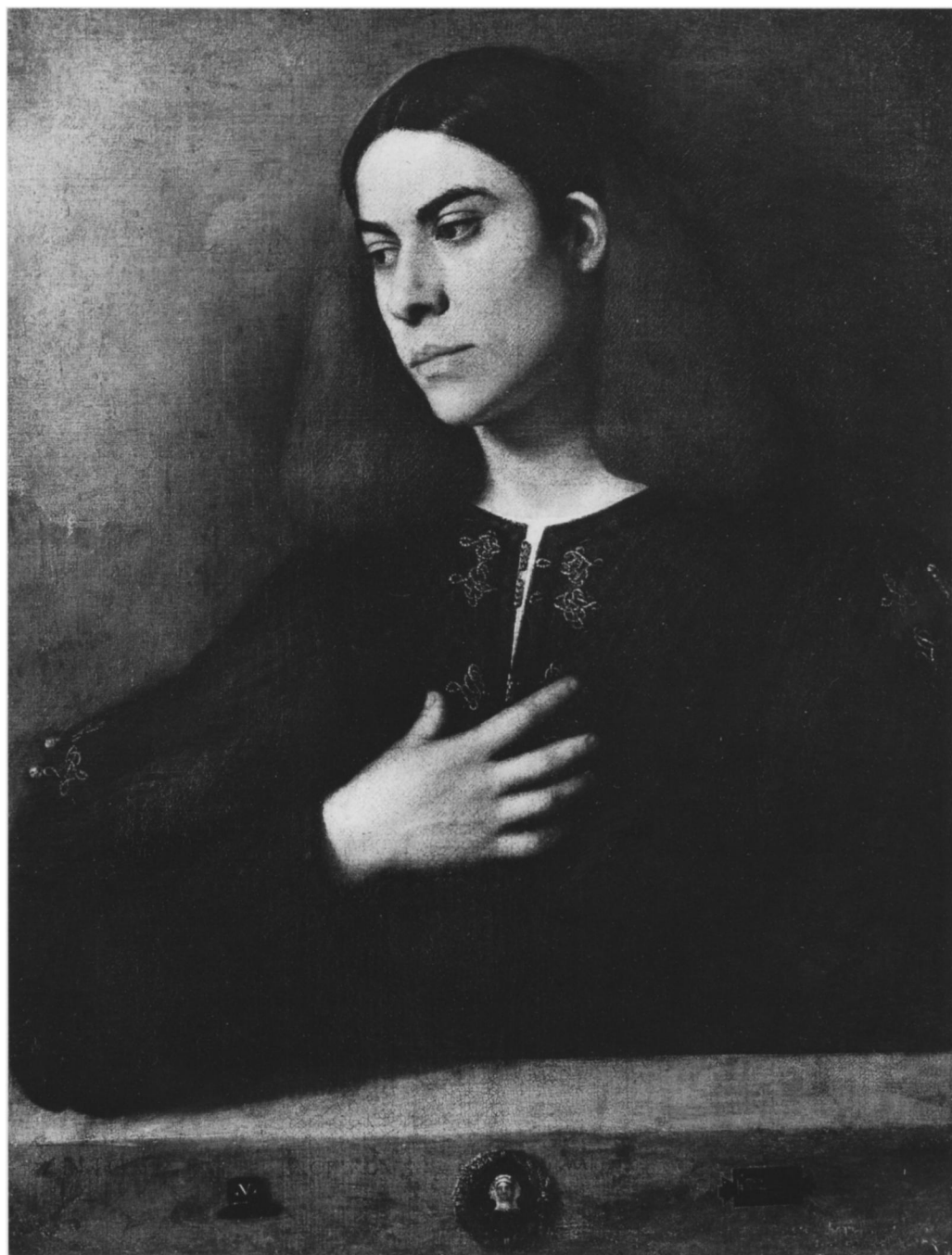


Fig. 6. GIORGIONE (circle of), *Portrait of a Young Man*, 72.5 by 54 cm. Budapest, Szépművészeti Múzeum.



Fig. 7. GIORGIONE (?) or TITIAN (?), *Portrait of a Gentleman*, canvas, 76 by 64 cm. Washington, National Gallery of Art.

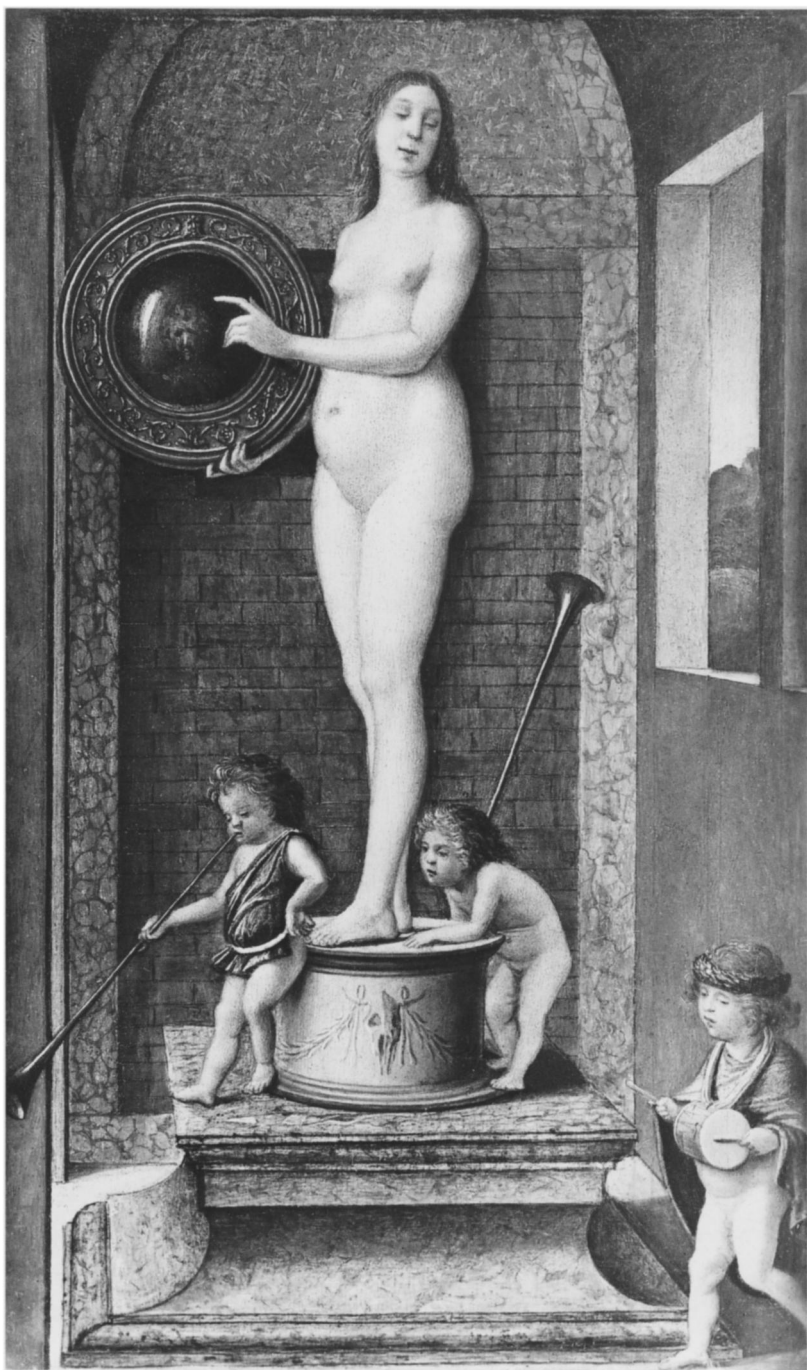


Fig. 8. GIOVANNI BELLINI, *Allegory of Truth*, panel, 34 by 22 cm. Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia.



Fig. 9. TITIAN, *Portrait of a Gentleman in Blue*, canvas, 81.2 by 66.3 cm. London, National Gallery.



Fig. 10. TITIAN, *Portrait of a Woman*, canvas, 118 by 97 cm. London, National Gallery.



Fig. 11. GIOVANNI CARIANI (attr. to), *Portrait of a Woman*, canvas, 90 by 65 cm. Modena, Galleria Estense.



Fig. 12. GIOVANNI CARIANI (attr. to), *Portrait of a Woman*, canvas, 64.5 by 60 cm. Budapest, Szépművészeti Múzeum.



Fig. 13. SEBASTIANO DEL PIOMBO, *Portrait of a Woman*, panel, 76 by 60 cm. Berlin, Staatliche Museen.



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Fig. 14. TITIAN, *Flora*, canvas, 79.7 by 63.5 cm. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi.
 Fig. 15. DOMENICO CAPRIOLO, *Legend of the Doubting Midwife*, signed, panel, 73.5 by 114 cm. Treviso, Museo Civico "L. Bailo".

the Este court of Ferrara, implying that the anonymous sitters, at least in certain cases, are Ferrarese courtiers. No detail better supports this argument than the peculiar hat on the Budapest portrait. In this instance, the artist and sitter have eloquently visualized a conceit from the dialogue *Filotimo*, a highly personal text that Collenuccio composed while on a diplomatic mission to Innsbruck and sent directly to duke Ercole I d'Este.⁵¹ Yet it would be a mistake to presume that all the portraits represent Ferrarese individuals, especially given the publication and wide circulation of Collenuccio's texts and ideas. The Washington portrait, for example, shows the Palazzo Ducale of Venice through the open window, an image suggesting that the gentleman is a Venetian diplomat in the service of the Doge.⁵² It is also relevant that the portraits under discussion are by Venetian or Veneto artists. A rich cultural exchange between Ferrara and Venice throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries provided the opportunity to popularize Collenuccio's fables outside the immediate circle of the Este court. To give just one significant example, the Venetian humanists Bernardo and Pietro Bembo, father and son respectively, resided in Ferrara for a substantial period of time.⁵³ Bernardo was the Republic's *visdomino* at Ferrara from 1497-1499, which enabled Pietro to stay on for several more years in the city and study philosophy and letters under the renowned scholar Nicolò Leonicensino. While at Ferrara, Pietro cultivated lasting friendships with the principal literary figures at court, including Ludovico

⁵¹ See COLLENUCCIO (ed. SAVIOTTI), *op. cit.* (see note 5), pp. 351-352.

⁵² Only in one instance can the name of the sitter be determined with some degree of certainty: this is the portrait (whereabouts unknown) inscribed "V V" on the parapet which also bears the inscription "L. CRASSUS DO. MDVIII" (or L. CRASSUS. DI. MDVIII) in the background next to a man holding a pair of glasses. The portrait has been traditionally attributed to Giorgione; see G. M. RICHTER, "Lost and Rediscovered Works by Giorgione (Part II)", *Art in America*, 30, 1942, pp. 211-224, esp. p. 223; and T. PIGNATTI, *Giorgione*, 2nd ed., Milan, 1978, p. 128. Pignatti cites Carlo Ridolfi's *Le maraviglie dell'arte* (1648), in which the historian records the portrait in the Venetian residence of Nicolò Crasso and identifies the sitter as the Venetian philosopher Luigi Crasso.

⁵³ On Bernardo Bembo's career, see N. GIANNETTO, *Bernardo Bembo, umanista e politico veneziano*, Florence, 1985. For Pietro Bembo's activity in Ferrara, see G. TIRABOSCHI, *Storia della letteratura italiana*, Modena, 1792, vol. 7, pt. 3, pp. 938-943; and M. CATALANO, *Vita di Ludovico Ariosto*, Geneva, 1930, vol. 1, pp. 142-144. A concise overview of their life and work can be found in the *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, 8, Rome, 1966, s.v. "Bembo, Bernardo", pp. 103-109; and s.v. "Bembo, Pietro", pp. 133-151. See also n. 65.

Ariosto, Celio Calcagnini, Ercole Strozzi, and Antonio Tebaldeo, not to mention Collenuccio. Both father and son were deeply interested in the visual arts, especially portraiture, and are just two of the many personalities who could have proliferated the ideas developed in Collenuccio's fables.⁵⁴ Notably, Bernardo Bembo's personal motto was "Virtus et Honor". Nor should we overlook that the Este sent numerous diplomats to Venice as well as to all the major centers throughout Italy, often with the express purpose of developing their artistic patrimony.⁵⁵ The Ferrarese elite frequently employed Venetian artists, such as Bellini and Titian, who were among the leading portraitists in Italy in the early sixteenth century.⁵⁶ What remains constant, however, is the common origin of the "V V" motif in Collenuccio's fables, composed while he was in the service of the Este court.

The question of identity leads us to Titian's *Portrait of a Gentleman in Blue* (London) (Fig. 9).⁵⁷ This work (ca. 1512) displays what appears to be the artist's initials, "T V" (Tiziano Vecellio), on the parapet below the elegantly attired subject. The traditional identification of the sitter as Ludovico Ariosto (1474-1533), the celebrated Ferrarese poet, dates back to the earliest record of

⁵⁴ Pietro Bembo served as an artistic advisor to Isabella d'Este (Ercole I's daughter) in Mantua, whereby he negotiated the commission of works of art from such artists as Giovanni Bellini and Andrea Mantegna. Bembo's role is summarized by GOFFEN, *op. cit.* (see note 37), pp. 238 and 243; and R. LIGHTBOWN, *Mantegna*, Berkeley-Los Angeles, 1986), pp. 190 and 451-452 (both studies contain further bibliography).

⁵⁵ For instance, while ambassador in Milan for Duke Ercole I d'Este, Antonio Costabili was responsible for sending the Cremonese-born painter Boccaccio Boccaccino (ca. 1467-1525) to the court of Ferrara. In a letter addressed to duke Ercole dated 1 April 1497, Costabili commends the painter to the duke, stating that Boccaccino "is reputed to be one of the best masters of his art in Italy", and considers him "not only as good as Ercole [de' Roberti] but much better". The original text of Costabili's letter is reprinted in A. PUERARI, *Boccaccino*, Milan, 1957, p. 210; English translation adapted from C. GILBERT, *Italian Art 1400-1500: Sources and Documents*, Englewood Cliffs, 1980, pp. 141-142.

⁵⁶ For an outline of artists, both foreign and domestic, working for the Este, see the register of documents compiled by Alessandra Pattanaro in A. BALLARIN, *Dosso Dossi: La pittura a Ferrara negli anni del ducato di Alfonso I*, vol. 1, Cittadella, 1995; A. FRANCESCHINI, *Artisti a Ferrara in età umanistica e rinascimentale: Testimonianze archivistiche*, pt. 2, vol. 2, from 1493 to 1516, Ferrara, 1997; and G. AGOSTINI-A. STANZANI, "Pittori veneti e commissioni estensi a Ferrara", in J. BENTINI-S. MARINELLI-A. MAZZA (eds.), *La pittura veneta negli stati estensi*, Modena, 1996, pp. 19-56.

⁵⁷ WETHEY, *op. cit.* (see note 31), pp. 11 and 103-104.

the work: an engraving of 1639 by Reinier van Persijn. The legend below the engraved image states that the picture was in the collection of Alfonso Lopez and identifies the sitter as Ariosto.⁵⁸ Based on physiognomic discrepancies between Titian's sitter and known sixteenth-century portraits of Ariosto, it is highly unlikely that the London portrait represents the poet. Nonetheless, Titian's employment of the parapet motif with the initials "T V" suggests that a Ferrarese context for the portrait is plausible. Evidence that Titian was drawing from a Ferrarese humanist tradition comes from his *Portrait of a Woman* (London) (Fig. 10), a work from approximately the same date, also inscribed "T V" below the sitter.⁵⁹ The x-radiograph of this picture reveals that the artist originally depicted a large single "V" on the raised part of the parapet, only to cover up the letter and paint a fictive marble bust of a woman in profile. Though it remains uncertain whether the letters "T V" existed at the time of the larger "V", Cecil Gould has asserted that the two sets of initials are distinct in their meaning.⁶⁰ The original presence of the initial "V" would indicate that Titian painted his two London portraits for a Ferrarese audience, or at least one familiar with Collenuccio's fables.

The first state of Titian's London *Portrait of a Woman* also shows how Renaissance women embraced the "V V" species of portraiture to pronounce their intellectual and moral prowess. In a *Portrait of a Woman* attributed to Cariani (Modena), a single "V" appears on the parapet below the sitter who cleverly holds open her index and middle fingers to form another "V" (Fig. 11).⁶¹ This portrait, executed

⁵⁸ E. M. BLOCH, "Rembrandt and the Lopez Collection", *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 29, 1946, pp. 175-186.

⁵⁹ WETHEY, *op. cit.*, (see note 31), p. 139. A technical examination of the painting is discussed by C. GOULD, "New Light on Titian's 'Schiavona' Portrait", *The Burlington Magazine*, 103, 1961, pp. 335-340.

⁶⁰ GOULD, *loc. cit.* (see note 59), p. 339. If "T V" does indeed represent Titian's initials – and this hypothesis is still open to question – then the two London portraits may stress the power of the artist to craft each sitter's identity more forcefully than letters and beyond the effects of a mirror. Also, it is possible that a second "V" existed where the bust of a woman now appears on the parapet in order to keep the letters centered.

⁶¹ The attribution of this painting is much debated. It is given to an anonymous Venetian painter by R. PALLUCCHINI, *I dipinti della Galleria Estense di Modena*, Rome, 1945, pp. 166-167; and in R. PALLUCCHINI-F. ROSSI, *Giovanni Cariani*, Bergamo, 1983, pp. 311-312, with a detailed attribution history. See also the entry by S. MASON in J. BENTINI (ed.), *Sovrane Passioni: Le raccolte d'arte della Ducale Galleria Estense*, exh. cat., Milan, 1998, p. 324.

around 1520, illustrates how Aesopian wisdom would have crossed social and gender boundaries. Instead of giving herself over to manly *virtù*, or displaying a *virtù* that is for the most part a reflection of her husband's worth (as is often the case in Renaissance portraits of women), here the sitter appropriates a common thread of humanism accessible to all.⁶² Book three of Castiglione's *Il libro del Cortegiano* emphasizes that both sexes were equally capable of virtue.⁶³ The reference to female *virtù* is signaled by the same gesture in another version of the portrait also attributed to Cariani, now in Budapest (Fig. 12), and in Sebastiano del Piombo's *Portrait of a Woman* (Berlin), painted around 1513 when the Venetian artist was working for elite clientele and members of the papal circle in Rome (Fig. 13).⁶⁴ Both pictures are devoid of inscriptions. Michael Hirst observes that the basket of fruit and roses held by Sebastiano's sitter, along with her red gown, have marital connotations, and he suggests that this is an epithalamic portrait. Reading her gesture as an indication of moral virtue befitting of a bride supports this interpretation. The commission and exchange of such portraits would have enabled women to transcend social restrictions and political immobility by advertising their self-worth: their beauty adorns their virtue.⁶⁵

⁶² See the interpretations of Renaissance portraits of women by E. CROPPER, "The Beauty of Women: Problems in the Rhetoric of Renaissance Portraiture", in M. W. FERGUSON-M. QUILLIGAN-N. VICKERS (eds.), *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourse of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, Chicago-London, 1986, pp. 175-190; P. SIMONS, "Women in Frames: the Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture", *History Workshop*, 25, 1988, pp. 4-30; and ID., "Portraiture, Portrayal, and Idealization: Ambiguous Individualism in Representations of Renaissance Women", in A. BROWN (ed.), *Language and Images of Renaissance Italy*, Oxford, 1995, pp. 263-311.

⁶³ See D. A. TRAFTON, "Politics and the Praise of Women: Political Doctrine in the Courtier's Third Book", in HANNING-ROSAND (eds.), *op. cit.* (see note 33), pp. 29-44.

⁶⁴ See the catalogue entries on these two portraits in *Tiziano: Amor Sacro e Amor Profano*, exh. cat., Milan, 1995, pp. 255 and 258. PALLUCCHINI-ROSSI, *op. cit.* (see note 61), pp. 88, n. 9, and 282-283, attribute the Budapest portrait to an anonymous Venetian artist, citing other versions. Sebastiano's portrait is analyzed in detail by M. HIRST, *Sebastiano del Piombo*, Oxford, 1981, pp. 95-97.

⁶⁵ The popular poetic conceit "Virtutem forma decorat" (Her beauty adorns her virtue) appears on the reverse of Leonardo da Vinci's portrait of Ginevra de' Benci (National Gallery of Art, Washington). Jennifer Fletcher associates the motto's accompanying bay and palm wreath with Bernardo Bembo's personal device in her essay "Bernardo Bembo and Leonardo's Portrait of Ginevra de' Benci", *The Burlington Magazine*, 131, 1989, pp. 811-816. On a purely abstract level, Titian's *Flora* of ca. 1517 (Florence) can be seen to represent the same poetic conceit. The beautiful goddess, a metonymy for the roses

One last example will serve to broaden our inquiry. Given the moral overtones of Collenuccio's *Specchio d'Esopo*, and considering the tradition of moralizing Aesop's fables in a Christian context (most significantly in the 1479 *Aesopus moralisatus*), it should come as no surprise to find, even though it has gone unmentioned, that the letters "V V" appear in a private devotional painting. This is the *Legend of the Doubting Midwife* (Treviso) (Fig. 15), signed and dated 1524 by the Venetian artist Domenico Capriolo (ca. 1494-1528).⁶⁶ The scene represents an episode from the apocryphal Book of James, or Protoevangelium (19-20), which relates how a midwife named Salome doubted the divine virgin birth of the Christ Child. Seeking proof from the Virgin Mary herself, the midwife was suddenly crippled in her hand. As she cried out to God an angel directed her to touch the infant Jesus, who healed her as she cradled and worshipped him. Capriolo, who incorporates this narrative within a Nativity scene, depicts the moment of the midwife's shocking and crippling revelation that she is in the presence of the Savior. Behind this scene a column base contains a marble relief inscribed "V V", letters which appear above a semi-nude man in rustic attire who sits atop the figure of Envy – personified as an old hag crouching on all fours.⁶⁷ The man sits in a triumphant position while holding a banner, an empty armor breastplate and weapons lay by his side; Envy looks up and back at him in anguish. With this seemingly pre-Christian image, Capriolo glosses the divine truth of Christ's miraculous birth (the Word made flesh) with the notion of conquest – pagan or otherwise. The unique symbolism of Collenuccio's *Specchio*

she offers the viewer, appears to signal virtue by forming a "V" with the splayed fingers on her left hand (Fig. 14). The gesture also serves to hold up the folds of her gown.

⁶⁶ The primary study on the artist's career and stylistic development is by G. FOSSALUZZA, "Profilo di Domenico Capriolo", *Arte Veneta*, 37, 1983, pp. 49-66. See also the *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, 19, 1976, s.v. "Caprioli (Capriolo), Domenico", pp. 210-211.

⁶⁷ The *locus classicus* for the personification of Envy as a pallid and gnarled old hag is Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, 2.775-794. The Ferrarese mythographer Lilio Gregorio Giraldi cites Ovid's passage in his *De deis gentium* (1548), reprint, New York-London, 1976, p. 53. Capriolo may well have known Andrea Mantegna's famous engraving *Battle of the Sea Gods* of the mid 1470s, in which Envy is personified as a demonic hag with withered breasts; see *Andrea Mantegna*, J. MARTINEAU (ed.), exh. cat., New York, 1992, pp. 285-287, with further bibliography.

d'Esopo suggests that the man aligns himself with virtue and truth – “V V” – whereas Envy is traditionally associated with falsehood and slander (calumny).⁶⁸ One could interpret the image as symbolic of God's triumph over Satanic envy. The sophisticated emblematic hieroglyph caters to the artistic and literary culture in Treviso, where the artist lived and worked beginning around 1517. Art historians have recognized that Capriolo based certain details of his composition on a private devotional painting of the same subject by Lorenzo Lotto, now in the Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena. Lotto's work was most likely commissioned in 1521 by a patron in Treviso.⁶⁹ By assimilating the inscription “V V” into his composition Capriolo demonstrates his own inventiveness as an artist while quoting a popular motif born out of Ferrarese humanist culture.

Certainly the significance of the “V V” motif depends in part upon the pictorial context. But since the letters began to appear in portraits around the time of Pandolfo Collenuccio's death in 1504, it is highly probable that he was responsible for their introduction in painting as well. Documents reveal that the humanist enjoyed friendships with such artists as Ercole de' Roberti and Giovanni Bellini; these are relationships that would have spawned a fertile exchange of artistic and literary ideas.⁷⁰ Furthermore, he was a learned

⁶⁸ Envy is, of course, the companion of Calumny in Lucian's famous ekphrasis on the painting *Calumny* by Apelles. Etymologically speaking, the devil is the arch-calumniator, for which see H. C. LEA, in A. HOWLAND (ed.), *Materials Toward a History of Witchcraft*, Philadelphia, 1939, p. 36.

⁶⁹ D. ARASSE, “Lorenzo Lotto dans ses bizarreries: Le peintre et l'iconographie”, in P. ZAMPETTI-V. SGARBI (eds.), *Lorenzo Lotto: Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il V centenario della nascita*, Treviso, 1981, pp. 365-382, esp. pp. 367-370; P. HUMFREY, *Lorenzo Lotto*, New Haven-London, 1997, pp. 56-58; and FOSSALUZZA, *loc. cit.*, (see note 66), pp. 59-60. Reference to the event of the doubting midwife is also found in the *Golden Legend*.

⁷⁰ In his *Pliniana defensio*, Ferrara, 1493, eir-eiiv, Collenuccio discusses the various properties of cinnabar, which, according to Pliny, was a mixture of the blood of a dragon and an elephant extracted from their mortal combat with one another. In defending Pliny's writings against Nicolò Leonicensio's accusations of error (*De Plinii et plurium aliorum in medicina erroribus*, published in 1491), Collenuccio states that the Ferrarese painter Ercole de' Roberti (*rarissimus pictor ferrariensis Hercules*) had given him a sample of cinnabar and promised to verify its genuineness. The passage is discussed by L. THORNDIKE, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, Morningside Heights, 1934, vol. 4, p. 598. On 17 May 1487 Giovanni Bellini witnessed a document drawn up in Collenuccio's house in Venice. Rona Goffen suggests that the Bellini may have already become acquainted with the humanist at Pesaro; GOFFEN, *op. cit.* (see note 37), pp. 226 and 264, no. 16. Alfredo Saviotti observes that Collenuccio was studying botany in Venice; SAVIOTTI (1888 [1974]), *op. cit.* (see note 4), pp. 48-49 and 76-77.

enthusiast of ancient epigraphy and possessed an impressive collection of ancient inscriptions.⁷¹ The appearance of the “V V” motif on a fictive parapet in Renaissance portraits does, as Thomson de Grummond rightly observed, have an epigraphic quality. Yet despite the classical inspiration, the parapet and inscriptions work within a contemporary context. When read against Collenuccio's fables, the initials animate the pictorial image and lend it an immediacy by invoking the living language of the vernacular together with new and modern expressions.⁷² More to the point, the integration of “V V” and its variants in the visual arts demonstrates the dissemination of Ferrarese humanism and testifies to the intimate exchange between image and text. What we discover when we connect the pictorial “V V” with Collenuccio's fables is the profound depth of the Aesopian curriculum and fabulist discourse in Renaissance court culture and beyond.⁷³



⁷¹ See S. GRANDINI, “Pandolfo Collenuccio e i duchi d'Este: Collezioni ed antichità epigrafiche a Ferrara”, in P. CASTELLI (ed.), *L'ideale classico a Ferrara e in Italia nel Rinascimento*, Florence, 1998, pp. 81-96.

⁷² My reading of the “V V” motif revises the traditional interpretation of the parapet in Renaissance portraiture as a horizon invoking mortality or the past; see C. CIERI VIA, “L'immagine dietro al ritratto”, in *Il ritratto e la memoria*, Rome, 1993, vol. 3, pp. 9-29; and CRANSTON, *op. cit.* (see note 32), pp. 37-44. I wish to acknowledge Debra Pincus for her helpful comments to me regarding the parapet in Venetian portraiture.

⁷³ The cultivation of the Aesopian program at the Este court lends to an interpretation of Dosso Dossi's decoration of Aesop's fables at the Castello del Buonconsiglio, Trent. I discuss the decoration in a forthcoming article to appear in *Modern Language Notes*.